

Issues and Challenges in Indian Higher Education System under NEP 2020

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in higher educational ecosystem is viewed as a transformative policy document for imparting quality education and research aimed at revisiting and restructuring Indian higher education system with focus on key pillars of equity, access, quality, affordability and accountability. The NEP 2020 is envisioned in creating institutions of excellence and meeting global competitiveness while upholding Indian traditions and value systems. Further, the policy strives to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio to 50% by 2035 and key policy changes towards teaching and research in terms of establishing multi-disciplinary higher education systems, creating National Research Foundation (NRF) and promoting Academic Bank of Credit (ABC) opens up new pathways in streamlining higher education dynamics. Moreover, the policy caters in facilitating governance and regulations reforms through Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). Nevertheless, the implementation of NEP 2020 has key challenges and issues before academic leaders and policy makers in terms of faculty shortage, inadequate funding, digital divide, fragmented governance norms and accreditations loopholes. Further, issues like institutional autonomy, internationalization and commercialization of higher education, and inclusive policy for SEDGs needs to be addressed. Keeping this in view, the present paper on the basis of reviewing past literature is an attempt to examine the nature and role of national education policy 2020, identify and examine the issues and challenges in implementation of NEP 2020 and to provide suggestions and policy measures for future research directions towards effective and equitable realization of NEP 2020's objectives.

Key Words: National Education Policy 2020, Equity, Viksit Bharat 2047, Quality education and Research, Governance, Academic-industry partnership, SEDGs.

Introduction

In the present dynamic academic landscape and knowledge driven societies, higher education institutions are considered as a pivotal force towards contributing in economic progress, national building and societal development. In this backdrop, Indian higher academic ecosystem too is tremendous contributor in creation and dissemination of knowledge in the world as it encompasses over 1100 universities, more than 45000 colleges, enrolling millions of students of diverse backgrounds and disciplines. Over the decades, Indian higher academic institutions have played a pivotal role towards social transformation, technological innovations, economic progress and overall nation building. The rapid growth and expansion of Indian higher education system can be effective towards building sound and robust academic and research ecosystem (Altbach and Jalote, 2020). Despite such developments, there still prevail challenges in Indian higher academic system in terms of governance reforms, quality education and research, equitable and inclusive education. Tilak (2018) and Varghese (2020) have highlighted same concerns confronting Indian higher education system as they opined that policy makers and academic leaders must act pragmatically to overcome issues like access, quality and equity and transform governance mechanism. It is in this backdrop that the National Education Policy was envisioned with creating India as knowledge driven hub by upholding traditional values and ethos and realizing the broader goal of Viksit Bharat (Developed India) by 2047 (National education Policy, 2020). One of the central focus of NEP 2020 policy document is to increase Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50% by 2035, the NEP policy document promotes student mobility across varied programs and institutions thereby introducing Academic Bank of Credit (ABC) with focus on multiple and flexible entry-exit options reflecting the focus to enhance participation and promote effective learning outcomes (GOI, NEP 2020 & Bal & Singh, 2023).

Further, NEP 2020 policy document fosters a research driven environment in universities and higher academic institutions with focus on creating multidisciplinary education and research universities (MERU) along with establishment of National Research Framework (NRF) as it tries to

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reimagining and transform Indian higher education landscape that align with global best practices through research & innovation (GOI, NEP 2020, Aithal & Aithal, 2023 & Chandrashekhar & Chidambaram, 2024).

It has been observed that though the Vision articulated in NEP 2020 policy document is progressive, student centered, research driven & holistic but there are certain difficulties in implementing NEP 2020 in its truest spirits. The governance structure, public investment, socio-economic contexts, equity and inclusion are some of the aspects which needs to be addressed. Verghese (2020) and Gupta (2023) has highlighted governance reforms must be put into practice and socio-economic aspects needs to be looked into in the higher education context. As reported by world bank (2022), public investment in higher education is not meeting the target of investing 6% of GDP in education sector as articulated in the NEP 2020 policy document thereby remains below global standards and practices and consequent upon it areas like faculty development, research promotion and digital transformation cannot be realized effectively.

Further, the NEP 2020 policy document highlights to promote equity and inclusion in academic context and at the same time meeting the needs and aspirations of socio economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) but there still exists disparities across gender, caste and region in academic landscape (Mishra & Patel, 2023; Mangat, 2024).

NEP 2020 policy document intends to drive research and innovation with holistic and inclusive education through governance reforms but translating policy commitments into result oriented practices is critical in the contemporary times.

It is in this backdrop, that the present paper is an attempt to analyze the nature and role of NEP 2020, further examine the issues and challenges confronting academic leaders in implementing NEP 2020 and lastly to draw conclusions and give suggestions and policy implications for academic leadership and educational administrators in higher education context necessary to attain and realize the broader goals of NEP 2020.

Issues and Challenges in the Indian Higher Education System under NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strives to create a vibrant and robust academic ecosystem with focus on providing flexible, holistic, and multidisciplinary and research driven learning experiences. The policy document reinforces to upheld Indian traditions and cultural values and simultaneously attains global competitiveness through cutting edge research and innovation (GOI, NEP, 2020). Though the policy document resonates with contemporary higher academic trends at international level, however its effectiveness and implementation can be attained by addressing existing structural bottlenecks.

Contemporary literature highlights if adequate investment and effective strategies are not taken into account the policy's basic philosophy and motive may not be met in its truest form. Therefore, the present section will try to explore and critically examine the main challenges facing Indian higher education system in context of NEP 2020 with focus on key aspects including institutional funding, governance, academic quality, quality research, digital infrastructure, equity and inclusion and student employability.

Governance and Regulations

Indian higher education system in order to be more effective and result oriented must relook and revisit its governance and regulatory mechanism. Over the past, higher education governance and regulations has been monitored and examined by various regulatory bodies like University Grants Commission (UGC), National Medical Commission (NMC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), Bar council of India etc and as such due to the multiple regulatory authorities the effectiveness under one regulatory body was missing lately (Verghese, 2020). Keeping this in view, NEP policy document decided to establish Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) so as to monitor, examine, analyze and consolidate the regulation, governance, accreditation, funding,

and academic standards of quality under one guiding umbrella thereby eliminating redundancy and streamline governance and regulations (Chandrashekhar & Chidambaram, 2024). However, earlier, resistance was observed from various statutory bodies in its formation and HECIs implementation resulted in its progress and policy uncertainty (Gupta, 2023). Nevertheless, it calls for promoting effective governance reforms and streamline regulation framework and build consensus and collaboration between central and state machinery to address and minimize institutional and regulatory fragmentation and align it with over NEP policy 2020.

Financial Infrastructure

The higher educational academic institutions effectiveness is somewhat attributed to the investment from public funding and institutional financial capacity. If adequate financial resources are at the disposal of universities and higher academic institutions, the quality of academic infrastructure in terms of research facilities, faculty development initiatives, digital learning platforms, student support services and innovations in curriculum development can be addressed effectively. Recent research studies have highlighted that due to lack of adequate financial support Indian higher academic institutions could not properly ensure developmental reforms in aspects like curriculum design, academic- industry linkages, digital infrastructure, faculty development programs and student development and progression (Singh & Sharma, 2023, and Aithal and Aithal, 2023). Similarly, as per World bank report (2022), the public investment in Indian education infrastructure is roughly 3 % to 4 % of their GDP towards education which is not in consonance with the NEP 2020 policy document that has allocated 6% of GDP towards Indian education system. This gap highlights that more robust steps need to be instantiated by policy makers in encouraging more public investment in education so as to ensure universities and other higher academic institutions improve its effectiveness and contribute towards economic progress and nation building.

Curriculum and Accreditation

In the contemporary education ecosystem, maintaining academic quality and standards of learning is critical for higher academic institutions for their success and survival. The quality of education is more or less depends upon the quality of faculty and standard of curriculum available at institutions and the nature of accreditation. The institution can no longer sustain in isolation thereby they must relook and revisit its curriculum policy and ensure it meets the demands of industry by introducing skill based courses having practical implications. Similarly, Sethy and Mahapatro (2025) have opined existing curriculum in institutions remain outdated and disconnected from existing skill requirements. Further, increase in the number of private institutions though is favourable in terms of increasing Gross enrollment ratio in the country but may pose challenge in terms of ensuring academic quality due to its commercialization nature (Tilak, 2018) thereby holistic and continuous accreditation of institutions must be put into practice so as to mitigate all the possible risks. In this direction, academic institutions must adhere to continuous internal assessment and audit in terms of curriculum revision and faculty development for ensuring overall academic integrity and quality (Raju and Das, 2023). The NEP 2020 policy document strives to put more focus on maintaining standards of accreditations by forming a unified accreditation system named as National Accreditation Council under the umbrella head of Higher Education Commission of India (Govt of India, NEP, 2020).

Equity, Inclusion, and the Digital Divide

NEP 2020 puts greater emphasis on maintaining equity and inclusion in higher educational context as it is considered a critical aspect to address the aspirations and expectations of socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). However, over the years it has been observed that not much has been done in this regard, as marginalized groups could not avail educational, scholarship services or other facilities in academic ecosystem. Aithal and Aithal (2023) pointed out that some progress has been made towards inclusivity in academic context however, structural bottlenecks like financial insecurity, lack of preparatory education, limited awareness still persists among SEDGs. Further,

Mishra and Patel (2023) have highlighted there exists some form of digital divide towards participation in digital learning and access to innovative tools particularly in low-income and rural students. Moreover, Mangat (2024) opined that students academic enrollment patterns gets affected due to regional imbalance, caste divisions and gender disparities and as such inclusive strategies must take into account socio- economic-cultural and infrastructural impediments in meeting policy's larger objective of equitable and inclusive access to higher education.

Research and Innovation

A primary focus of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is to project Indian higher education as a research and innovation driven academic system. In this regard, the formation of the proposed National Research Foundation (NRF) is mandated to enhance institutional research capability, promote interdisciplinary mindset and increase country's overall global competitiveness. However, it has been observed that the Gross Expenditure on Research and Development (GERD) in India at present is below 1% of GDP, which is comparably low that other progressive economies like Germany, United States and South Korea (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). Such scenario, impedes the process of developing high end research ecosystem and curbs the scale of scientific progression and growth. It therefore, calls for making NRF more robust and advanced with focus on increased public investment, industry-academia collaboration, quality publications, patents, cutting edge research and technological upgradation which eventually will serve and address socio-cultural interests of society and meet country's global competitive aspirations (Agarwal & Kaushik, 2022 & Pawar, 2024).

Faculty Shortages and Professional Development

In the present dynamic academic ecosystem, higher educational institutions contribute effectively towards societal development, cultural harmony and nation building and in this regard, role of faculty members are considered critical as they act as torchbearer in articulating institutional goals and vision among all the relevant stakeholders (NEP, 2020). The developmental initiatives taken by academic institutions towards its transformation can be linked to attracting and retaining adequate and competent faculty talent in dissemination of knowledge and creating effective learning ecosystem driven by promoting faculty development and capacity building programs. Singh and Sharma (2023) have highlighted that faculty training is important aspect as it encompasses research mentoring, curriculum design skills and hands on experience in digital pedagogy. However, as per annual report of AISHE (2023) shortage of faculty members in universities and higher academic institutions is identified as a key challenge, consequent upon it research supervision capacity is limited and affects overall research environment. In this backdrop, NEP policy document points out the institutional interventions towards promoting capacity building and faculty development programs that aims towards their professional development.

Employability and Academia-Industry Linkages

The academic-industry partnership has gained tremendous significance over the years with focus on developing curriculum in alignment with industry requirements and expectations. As per recent studies Raju and Das (2023) it was analyzed that there exists significant gaps between labour market requirements and what institutions has to offer particularly viz a viz their curriculum. The labour market at present demands prospective employees to have relevant skills suitable for industry ecosystem (Sethy and Mahapatro, 2025). In this regard, it calls for academic institutions to develop and sensitize students with updated curriculum and enrich their soft skills and other competencies acceptable among relevant corporate market. NEP 2020 policy document echoes the need for industry collaborations in aspects like incubation centres, internship opportunities, vocational training, digital pedagogy and facilitating employment avenues.

Suggestions and Policy Implications

The National Education Policy (NEP) implementation calls for taking strategic initiatives and steps grounded in leadership dynamics, adequate public financing, institutional capacity and governance

reforms, addressing same will help in realizing policy's holistic vision to transform the delivery of Indian higher education ecosystem. Based on reviewing the recent studies and literature and examining challenging confronting higher education system in India, this section highlights some of the key suggestions and policy measures for academic leaders and government in realizing the transformative vision of NEP 2020.

- i) Firstly, NEP 2020's broader vision of transforming Indian higher education system requires adequate public financing and investment. Though the policy document states the target of allocating 6% of GDP to education sector, but actual spending is substantially low (World Bank report 2022). It therefore boils down to institutional commitment and government actions towards sustained financing and targeted budgetary allocation in education as that will play a vital role towards attaining NEP's broader objective and vision of transforming Indian academic landscape.
- ii) Secondly, it calls for streamlining the proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) with focus on its functions, roles, mandate and structural association with existing bodies like AICTE, UGC, NBA and other professional bodies and councils. Governance reforms, institutional autonomy and stronger mechanisms are key components towards maintaining quality standards (Verghese, 2020). Further, central and state governments must collectively unite and this calls for their administrative and legislative coordination in addressing regulatory fragmentation.
- iii) Thirdly, National Education Policy 2020, envision Indian becoming knowledge centre at world level leading to the vision of becoming Viksit Bharat (Developed India) by 2047. In that endeavor, promoting research culture in universities and other higher academic institutions through interdisciplinary research, industry –academia partnerships, mentorship activities, capacity building programs, international-research collaborations, and student scholarships is paramount Agarwal and Kaushik (2022) as same has been reiterated in NEP's policy about the role and mandate of National Research Foundation (NRF) in achieving its research goals.
- iv) Fourthly, as faculty are pivotal in creating institutions of excellence, it become critical to invest in faculty development programs, faculty exchange programs so as to enrich their digital pedagogical competence, leadership skills, and capacity building initiatives. Mishra and Patel (2023) have highlighted faculty development initiatives like participation in seminars and workshop, curriculum design in institutions for promotion of better teaching-learning ecosystem and inculcating spirit of continuous development and innovation.
- v) Fifthly, NEP 2020 policy document though on paper highlights removing socio-economic disparities, promoting inclusivity and equity, access to education, but there still exists some gaps, therefore it is suggested, context and region specific equity interventions must be taken care of as well as gender responsive learning environment must be promoted in academic context so as to meet the aspirations and expectations of access to education and digital literacy programs of socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs).
- vi) Moreover, industry-academic linkages must be strengthened through MOUs and inviting industry experts in designed curriculum in line with industry requirements and developing requisite skills among students and thereby making them market ready. Further, academic – industry collaboration will foster and develop student's overall professional skills through internship, study projects and experiential learning about labour market. As mandated in NEP 2020 policy document industry –academic collaboration is critical for developing graduate skills and opening employment avenues for 21st century learners.
- vii) Lastly, it is suggested, that the implementation of NEP 2020 calls for regular policy assessment and evaluation supported by developing robust real time national dashboards that continuously monitor and update policy initiatives across equity, access to education, quality

education, faculty performance, research output, digital literacy, graduate employability and overall governance reforms. Addressing same measures can be effective for institutional leaders and policy makers in realizing NEPs vision of transforming Indian education ecosystem into knowledge driven hub and increasing its academic and research competitiveness.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisages transforming Indian education landscape as a centre of excellence at global stage and attaining its broader objective of becoming knowledge hub and realizing its vision of Viksit Bharat (developed India) by 2047. The NEP 2020 policy document reiterates to relook and revisit its existing education structure and enriching its functioning with focus on quality research at university and college level through establishing National Research Foundation (NRF), providing holistic and multidisciplinary education system and setting up Multidisciplinary educational research universities (MERU). The policy aims to increase its Gross enrollment ratio to 50% by 2035 and plans to facilitate access to education with focus on equity and inclusiveness and addressing the socio cultural disparities, gender sensitiveness and addressing aspirations and expectations of SEDGs. The policy reiterates to reform its higher education framework through forming various councils under the umbrella of Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to address aspects of accreditation, funding, regulations and academic standards of education. Further the NEP 2020 strive towards promoting teacher education by framing National Curriculum Framework for teacher Education, promoting innovative reforms through adoption of technological interventions in education by establishment of National Educational Technological Forum (NEFT). The NEP 2020 policy puts faculty members as central pillar towards shaping and excelling higher educational landscape in the country through their capability and dedication and for this it calls for timely, transparent and merit based recruitment for reaching positions in universities and other academic institutions.

However as observed and analyzed in previous sections, the fulfillment of such reforms is dependent upon prompt and robust actions taken up by policy makers and educational practitioners in areas like educational and governance reforms, faculty development, digital transformation, public investment and long term financing and thereby meeting up and realizing the broader goals of the NEP 2020 of becoming developed economy for the future.

Keeping in view the policy goals of NEP 2020 as discussed in the preceding sections, there exist certain bottlenecks in its implementation. The aim of making Indian higher education landscape into research driven ecosystem and complimenting it with infrastructural advancements can be at crossroads if there still prevails underinvestment in higher education, and not addressing specific aspects concerning higher education in terms of regional imbalances, socio-economic disparities, equity and inclusion, digital divide, curriculum not aligned with industry requirements, low focus on faculty re-skilling and institutional overall competitiveness (Verghese, 2021, Tilak, 2022 and Aithal and Aithal, 2023).

Nevertheless, National Education Policy, 2020 is well chalk out plan for reforming Indian higher education ecosystem and provides a strategic blueprint of reshaping and transforming Indian higher education landscape into knowledge driven hub at global and international platforms. The policy reiterates its commitment to focus on cutting edge research, rapid innovation, internationalization of education, and outcome based learning that meets international trends and drives itself into global knowledge economy (Altbach and de Wit, 2023). It is therefore critical for the effective implementation of NEP 2020 to have inclusive and holistic policy based on strategic planning, community engagement, academic-industry linkages and timely actions from policy makers, academic leaders and educational administrators to address equity, access and quality of higher education and further lead towards attaining institutional efficiency and overall global academic competitiveness.

Future Research Directions

Keeping in view the nature and complexity of NEP 2020 initiatives, various opportunities and pathways for future research emerges in academic, research and governance context in Indian higher education system:

First and foremost, context-specific studies in socio-economically and geographically diverse areas will be productive in examining whether NEP initiatives about promoting equity and inclusiveness strengthens academic progress in rural higher education or creates structural and regional disparities.

Secondly, it is suggested that future research can explore studies on digital transformation in higher education with specific assessment of digital equity, technology driven pedagogy and blending learning outcomes.

Thirdly, future research can conduct longitudinal studies to examine the how educational restructuring and reforms can aid in fostering graduate employability skills, research acumen and student learning outcomes through updated curriculum. Accordingly, comparative assessment and data of institutions across central, state and private universities can provide in depth insights analysis about institution's progress in its implementation.

Fourthly, policy analysis should be initiated to gather the information about the functioning of National Research Foundation (NRF) in academic and research settings with focus on academic-industry collaboration, research funding and innovation.

Lastly, it is suggested that future research studies on NEP 2020 can understand and explore the working relationship between central and state functionaries towards promotion of governance and regulatory reforms under Higher Education Commission of India (HECI).

In conclusion, while NEP 2020 marks a historic milestone in reimagining India's higher education system, its success will ultimately depend on adaptive implementation, continuous evaluation, and evidence-informed policy refinement. Sustained scholarly engagement will therefore be indispensable in shaping the evolving trajectory of higher education reform in India.

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